"Hooking Kids on History: The Teacher Academy Model" By Pam Su'a, Jordan School District Social Studies Specialist

In January, 2000, the Utah Academy of Teachers (UAT) under the direction of Rebecca Anderson from the Utah State Office of Education, was established with funds from a U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality grant, with the hope that this unique six-week professional development experience would positively impact social studies and language arts teachers. Teachers who were involved in the initial phase of the project came out of their classrooms for a quarter during the school year to attend the Academy and were replaced by certified teachers as substitutes. Eventually, the UAT became a summer program as well, allowing teachers the choice of summer or school year attendance. Over the past four years, over 800 Utah teachers have been trained by the UAT.

The Utah Academy of Teachers fits into an overall Utah Teacher Development Continuum by providing a long-term, collaborative experience, based on latest research in best practices, and encouraging active practice on newly-learned strategies. Teachers also participated in on-going follow-up and action research. Collaboration between language arts teachers, who teach literacy skills and processes, and social studies teachers, who teach that all-important content was established and encouraged.

During the summer of 2003, the Utah Academy of Teachers morphed into ten separate district Academies held in Box Elder, Park City, Davis, Granite (2 academies), Tooele, Jordan, Nebo, Iron County and Washington County. Each followed the basic structure set up by the original UAT but each also changed some elements to direct the instruction and format to meet individual district needs.

Currently, a number of Utah school districts have found funds to continue Teacher Academies individually, still providing excellent, long-term professional development for social studies/history teachers. However, two questions are being asked: Do social studies teachers need extended professional development when it is not tested under NCLB? Would we not better spend time and money focusing only on numeracy and literacy?

In the chaotic and confusing world of 2005, it is imperative that effective social studies/history teachers on all grade levels specifically understand the importance of what they do and are committed to strong teaching practices. There is an increasing need for social studies programs to prepare students for the future. In our twenty-first century world, students need to understand the lessons history teaches us: key historical ideas and events, economic and social sources, the effect of geography on people's lives and people's lives on geography, political forces in a democratic society and a variety of global issues and challenges (Seig, 2003). Teachers need to teach differently than we have traditionally done, and need to be more committed to our craft than ever before.

David McCullough, Pulitzer Prize winning historian, gives us a rationale for putting the focus on the value of our work as social studies teachers. He suggests that "the best way to know where the country is going is to know where we've been. . . history teaches us how to behave. It teaches and reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for . . . history teaches with specific examples the evils of injustice, ignorance or demagoguery, just as it shows how potent is plain courage, or one simple illuminating idea . . . we live in an era of momentous change, creating great pressures and tensions. But history shows us that time of tumult are the times

when we are most likely to learn. This nation was founded on change. We should embrace the possibilities inherent in such times and hold to a steady course, because we have a sense of navigation, a sense of what we've been through and who we are" (McCullough, 2002).

When history teachers have a passion for what they teach and the tools to teach it well, we can help become part of the change in our society that will need to happen for a civilized democracy to endure. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 and other recent events, history can be a source of strength and a return to the commitment of the ideals and principles upon which our country was founded (McCullough, 2002). We must have teachers who are able to engage all our students in examining historical events and relating these to events today. We must encourage and practice civic dialogue with our students. And students must be able to understand events from multiple perspectives. Students must be taught to view history as a continuum upon which they, themselves stand.

The Utah Academy of Teachers looked at how best to effect change in social studies/history instruction. The first step was to **base social studies teaching on Understanding by Design** (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998]. This model helps teachers design curriculum that hones in on enduring understandings and essential questions, getting rid of trivia and fluff. It uses authentic assessments based on the goals for the instruction. Academy teachers are trained in the backward design theory, see model units based on backward design, and then take a unit they already teach and restructure it using backward design. They are given opportunities to attend follow-up days where this theory is reinforced and discussions are held on how best to institute major changes in classroom instruction.

This is where the collaboration with language arts teachers makes history teaching so strong. Focusing on strategies such as using background knowledge, making inferences, asking good questions, and making predictions are important as teachers develop the historians' skills in their students. When instruction becomes less lecture and more student-centered, students enjoy their role as active participants and begin to take more responsibility for their own learning. When students are able to better read history content, they are able to better analyze and understand it.

The last step is that **teachers must use primary sources as instructional tools**. When students are able to "slip into the lives of others" (Holt, 1995) through using primary sources, history comes alive to them. They are able to understand cause and effect, motivation, comparison and contrast and other important historians' tools. They begin to think as young historians and develop a reason and passion for their study. Studying history requires debate and an ability to contextualize evidence. Primary source materials open the door to this interpretive side of history (Norby, 2003/02004). Using primary sources to analyze historical events gives students a step up in understanding and loving history and placing themselves along the continuum of history. When teachers and students use the National Archives and Library of Congress as resources for primary documents in their study of history, the subject becomes something more than black and white pages in our two-inch thick textbooks.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the Academy model, we have compiled statistics and data, but even more effective is what the teachers themselves have to say. When asked to respond to the

question "How has the Teacher Academy had an impact on your classroom practice?" here is a sampling of what they said:

- "The Teacher Academy has provided me with a vision and a model for what effective teaching can be. One thing that has really impacted my teaching and my students' learning is the enduring understanding. It connects the dots for my students and helps them see learning as a journey of self-awareness"—Jodi I., World Civilizations, high school
- "The Teacher Academy changed my teaching practices dramatically. It taught me to look at my approach to teaching in a whole new perspective. I now plan my lessons with specific goals in mind. I eliminated all of the meaningless assignments that had no real purpose and began using a variety of teaching strategies. The use of integration of reading and writing has brought my lessons to life and has increased my enjoyment of teaching as well.—Summer V., Utah Studies/Geography, middle school.
- "The Academy changed the way I think about teaching. I no longer teach reading as an isolated subject, but realize it must be integrated into the teaching of all subjects".—Marguerite H. 3rd grade
- "The Academy has done wonders for my instructional ability and working with other teachers. I have noticed an improvement in reading comprehension and retention and writing skills, and enjoy a more productive and comfortable classroom environment using the skills and strategies we learned".—Ben J., Geography, middle school
- "The strategies and techniques I learned in the Teacher Academy have created not only an enthusiasm and excitement in me as a teacher, but I see my students charged, creative and eager to participate in methods that are engaging and fun. These strategies help students see they can enjoy successes—AND THEY ARE!"—Shanna C., Language Arts/reading, junior high school
- "The Teacher Academy revolutionized my practice by teaching me how to create and use backward design. It helped me use effective cooperative learning strategies with students working together to do student-centered research, idea sharing, fact finding, analysis, design, debate, etc."—Liz A., Language Arts, middle school
- "The Teacher Academy solidified my desire to teach. It gave me confidence and compassion to be a successful teacher. A change for the better is a positive change for my students"—Trish B., English, high school
- "My whole outlook on teaching changed after the Teacher Academy"—Kimese U. middle school
- "The biggest change that the Academy made is for me to change the way I think about kids: where they are, even if it's more work. Because really if I teach the same old way, I make myself more work than if the students are engaged."—Elizabeth D., middle school
- "The Academy made me more aware of my students' needs. I realized that I could teach reading strategies while I taught history. It is natural to expect them to read in a history class and it did not take much effort to add the reading strategies to help them better understand the historical concepts".—Beth L. Geography, middle school

The goal of the Utah Academy of Teachers, and now district Academies, is to produce passionate, intelligent teachers who understand the importance of teaching history and making it meaningful to all their students and who are able to effectively do so. Utah's school districts are finding that giving teachers the tools, the training and the time to learn and plan is achieving the goal of hooking kids on history and training our students to become effective e and responsible citizens of the twenty-first century.

References

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